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DEPARTMENT FOR EEB/IFD/OIA AND AF/W
DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS USTR FOR CONNIE HAMILTON
PLEASE PASS OPIC FOR JOHN SIMON
TREASURY FOR OREN WYCHE-SHAW, RICHARD HALL, AND JOHN RALYEA
COMMERCE FOR STEVEN GARDNER AND SALIHA LOUCIF
ACCRA FOR KEVIN MCCOWAN
DAKAR FOR USDA AND FAA

REF A) 07 MONROVIA 1260
REF B) 07 MONROVIA 1201

E.O. 12598: N/A

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SUBJECT: LIBERIA'S COMMERCE MINISTER AND TIFA/AGOA UPDATE

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Minister of Commerce is committed to progress under TIFA and is already planning for the AGOA workshop and an AGOA Resource Center. Plans are underway for a standards lab in Monrovia that will permit sanitary and phyto-sanitary tests. The Minister supports establishment of commercial courts. However, Liberia still faces many challenges before exports are likely to reach international standards. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) The Ambassador and Econoff met January 11 with Frances Johnson Morris, Minister of Commerce, to review the status of items on the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) work plan and other trade issues. Following is a summary of some of the work plan topics (with numbers referencing the "U.S.-Liberia TIFA Council Meetings Action Items for Follow-Up" list).

Interagency AGOA Workshop (items 5 and 14)

3. (SBU) The Ambassador conveyed USTR's proposal of a February 7-8 event, and asked whether the GOL would be able to support and organize a workshop during that period. The Minister said planning for an event the first week of February was well underway but she would confirm the dates with the stakeholders. She provided a draft agenda, proposed participant list, and status report for the workshop. We will encourage to GOL to include members of the legislature in the workshop (per item 14 of the work plan). (Note: The Minister's office confirmed the February 7-8 dates on January 14. However, we will be consulting with the Ministry on possible March dates in light of recent information from Washington. End note)

4. (SBU) For the AGOA workshop, the GOL is planning an exhibition of Liberian products, including arts and crafts that might be suitable for export under AGOA. Chili peppers that are being grown, on the advice of the West African Trade Hub, have already found a buyer in Europe.

March Trade Mission to Ghana (Item 3)

5. (SBU) The Accra Trade Hub reports it has worked with USDA and the Accra-based contractors (selected to assist in the USDA March Trade and Investment Mission (TIM)), for matchmaking opportunities between regional firms and U.S. companies and investors. The Trade

Hub made specific matchmaking suggestions to USDA and Brooks Associates; however, no Liberian companies were found to be suitable matches for the U.S. companies on the TIM.

¶16. (U) Embassy Monrovia is still consulting with trade professionals and agricultural experts in Liberia and will forward a few more candidates this week. However, most of the possible candidates would be importers (and not eligible for USG sponsorship) rather than exporters.

AGOA Resource Center (Item 10)

¶17. (SBU) The Minister told us they had received communication on the proposal for an AGOA Resource Center and understood the host should be a private, rather than a government, entity. They are suggesting the Liberian Chamber of Commerce. The Accra Trade Hub reported January 16 that it had scheduled a one-day AGOA Workshop in Liberia to coincide with the opening of the new AGOA Resource Center (ARC) in Monrovia for April, but is now working to move that to March to possibly coincide with the interagency AGOA workshop. Embassy Monrovia requests closer coordination with the WATH/A office as neither State nor USAID officers in Monrovia had received any information on this initiative.

Commercial Court system (Item 11)

¶18. (SBU) The Ambassador asked about interest in establishing a commercial court system for Liberia. The minister, who is a lawyer and was previously the Minister of Justice, said the proposal had been around since the 1990s. She had been a debt court judge and was well aware of the ineffectiveness of the current system and its impact on banks and other companies. She said that in addition to working with Commerce, the proposal should be pursued with the

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Supreme Court and the Bar Association. (Note: Post welcomes the ongoing contact with the Department Of Commerce's Commercial Law Development Program and looks forward to working with them to move this very important initiative forward. Another promising initiative includes assistance in streamlining the public procurement process. End note.)

Standards Lab (Item 2)

¶19. (SBU) The USG is funding rehabilitation of the Ministry of Public Works, which will include space for a standards lab. UNIDO has committed \$250,000 to equipping the lab (and has hired away the Minister's very efficient personal assistant). The GOL already has people undergoing training in Ghana. The lab will allow the GOL to build cases against purveyors of dangerous or counterfeit products (particularly pharmaceuticals) and will be an essential step in attaining the sanitary and phyto-sanitary standards necessary for export of agricultural products and seafood.

Boston Seafood Show (Item 6)

¶10. (SBU) On that note, the Minister confirmed that there are no Liberian firms that are at a level where participation at the Boston Seafood Show next month would be feasible. Having consulted widely with business and government contacts, we support her opinion.